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## Family Tree

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*College of DuPage*

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## FAMILY TREE

*Hector Mirande*

The house had become a sea of cardboard corpses, each housing its share of memories, with little identifying lists like headstones: Debbie's toys, Alex's books.

"It's a job, like any other, with palm trees," Tim spoke into his coffee mug.

Beth buttered the same piece of toast for the third time. If she at least postponed the argument, she could keep him seated long enough to get some details.

"How do you see the move?" she finally asked.

"I go first, then you follow and bring the kids when school ends," he answered.

"No!" she insisted "I need more, times, dates, and like that I need to know exactly how you see things so that I can plan."

He put down the paper and looked at her for a long time before speaking. "Look, I try to get as much information as I can. Then I come to huge chunks of data that can only be imagined and then only by comparing to previous experience can I make decisions. When I think about a topic, anything, I bring up all the information to my conscious screen like a cover of Life magazine, a symbol representing what I know and can remember on the subject. Each time I bring it up, I get the cover. It doesn't change until I live an experience at the emotional and physical level sufficiently different to change the symbol beyond the cover: then up pops a different cover, "Do you understand?"

"I need words, sentences, conversation. I need the assurance of repetition" answered Beth. How long had they known each other intimately, in every way two people could know each other. Courtship, love, sex, acclimation to each



other's family, culture and religion. Children and now age and change, real change. Had they come full circle? His biggest worry was his receding hairline and loss of upper arm strength neither of which she could indentify as anything of significance. Her problems were related to him. Change was meaningless unless it affected him. Were her breasts sagging too much, her buttocks too dimpled, her belly too large . . . for him?

Each year he came out of his physical the same way. "Thompson keeps asking me about my stream; is it slow to start, slow to stop? I think he wants to keep comparing like we were kids and had distance piss offs" Beth poured a second cup and sat down. The table had become their only refuge in this house undergoing slow decay. Their only link to a vibrant past being ripped out piece by piece; scattered in unrecognizable forms all around in a gigantic moulting and Beth felt strangely vulnerable.

"What are you doing today?" she finally asked, changing the subject.

"Dunno yet, clean up the yard a little," answered Tim. He hardly knew this woman across from him, at least not in this fearful insecure form. Had his titubation about the move, his doubts about leaving an almost perfect job for an uncertain opportunity, shaken her this much? She had never asked so many questions. He still remembered her as a young girl gathering their son in one arm and her belongings in the other and leaving her parents' home, perhaps forever, without a backward glance.

He went out to gather his tools. No matter how modern they thought they had become, the outside was his territory and the inside was hers. He had left his tools to be packed last, just as she had left the kitchen makings of something warm to drink, to welcome one from the outside.

As he was putting on his coveralls he became aware of a branch on a tall maple being whipped in the wind and brushing the roof with a loud sound. The last time the insurance agent had come around to settle a claim he told them, "You've built too close to the trees especially that one." He had pointed to the forty foot giant, gently swaying protectively over the house. Now the giant stood at least fifty feet and seemed to be caressing the house. As Tim went for his extension ladder he remembered the agent saying "It has to be done by a professional, you can't do it yourself." Tim set up the ladder on the deck so he could reach at least the first giant fork. He remembered his son's last summer at home; how even his powerful arms, of "three sets a day, every day — no pain no gain," had proved no match for even a lesser branch as it came thundering down, ripping the rope from his hands and taking out a stretch of fence and a section of gutters. The wind was really whipping up now and it made his hands feel stiff but he continued in his task, no longer thinking,



just losing himself to the feel of the moment. He split the entire task into small manageable segments. He went for the chain saw and after a few pulls it roared with a cloud of oil smoke and vibrated like a live animal in his hand. He summoned Beth to the deck and was surprised by her look of concern. He asked her to steady the ladder, "What are you doing?" she asked in a panic as he disappeared into the first branches.

"I want no part of this," she said. "I'm letting go of the ladder," she shouted without conviction. She could no longer see him but could still feel his weight on the top of the ladder twisting in her hands. She gripped the ladder tightly and leaned against it with all her weight, the feel of the metal rungs cool on her forehead. She had seen that look before. Total concentration, total goal orientation. It fascinated her, like a wild animal fascinated her, but she didn't want to be near it, much less be tied to it in a variety of symbiotic knots. The wind was now moving the ladder even with her weight on it. "Come down right now, don't be crazy . . ." The rest was drowned out by the roar of the power saw and she was showered by wood chips which came down like snow flakes and got in her hair and blinded her. She began to cry with rage. It was getting darker and she could see her warm kitchen with her mug of tea steaming through the window. The kitchen light was on and it imparted a pleasant glow over the last of her things, not yet wrapped in newspaper for another life. All of a sudden the ladder leaned and the saw came crashing cutting a huge gouge on the arm rail before plummeting down in silence. She saw the light in the kitchen sputter and heard Tim shout as the ladder returned to its position. "Don't move" he shouted, "The ladder is touching the power line." Even as he spoke a shower of sparks came down on her with a pungent smell of ozone. Each move Tim made brought a shower of sparks. They both rested at their respective ends of the ladder, he excited with a new problem to solve, she knowing none of it had been necessary. "Listen to me," he finally said "Push the ladder and stand clear, and I'll jump for a branch; on three, go!"

As usual, a plan was implemented which included her participation and she was given no time to input, no time to think, just react. And react she did, even before Tim had finished counting, she had gathered all the strength her cold and stiff muscles could deliver and shoved the ladder off the deck leaving Tim dangling, his arms not quite circling a branch. She saw him swing momentarily, his work gloves ripping, as he slowly lost his grip and came tumbling thirty feet like a load of dirty laundry being thrown in the basement. She calmly went back onto the kitchen and began sipping her cold tea. This is how he found her when he finally limped in. They both knew something had broken and they both knew they were going to make it.